

Goal One: *Ensure that Vermont's public education system operates within the framework of high expectations for every learner and ensure that there is equity in opportunity for all.*

The state of Vermont is a national and international leader in education. From exceptional teachers and visionary leadership to creative instruction and leading-edge assessment, Vermont enjoys a highly regarded educational system which serves as a model for states and schools. Whether best schools, best places to raise a family or best social indicators, Vermont is generally found on virtually every top 10 list dealing with education and social well-being.

Yet, despite these achievements, we have pressing questions and concerns:

- Does Vermont have a persistent achievement gap?
- What is the profile of students impacted by the achievement gap?
- What resources are needed to close the achievement gap?
- Do disparities in spending contribute to the achievement gap?
- How and to what degree are schools meeting the Education Quality Standards?
- What does "opportunity" look like throughout the state?

Initial Steps

The first step is defining the nature, extent and location of achievement, opportunity and financial gaps. Employing existing achievement and finance data we can easily identify achievement and spending gaps and the locations where they appear to exist.

In terms of opportunities, the Education Quality Standards (EQS) implementation framework (now in development) will be used as the starting point. A discussion model is scheduled to be publicly presented in December 2014. The SBE will explore areas such as access to coursework, differentiated instruction, the academic needs of students, time in classrooms, facilities, teacher training and expertise, leadership, and technology.

When considering the barriers to meeting EQS, the SBE will, with support from the Agency, conduct and review research as well as take testimony from a large variety of stakeholders. Once barriers to equity in opportunity are empirically identified, strategies will be created to address the areas of defined need.

There is a need for a careful study of formula weights and whether they are too high, too low, or at the correct level, (poverty, bi-lingual, max loss/gain, etc). The interaction of these revenues

with expenditures needs examination. For example, schools with the highest poverty counts and aid are generally lower spenders.

For each area of need, responsible agents will be identified to ensure these areas are addressed. Equity is a mutual responsibility of local districts along with the state and federal governments.

Goal Two: *Ensure that the public education system is stable, efficient, and responsive to ever-changing population needs, economic and 21st century issues.*

When measured by costs per pupil, the state is considered “high spending” by most observers. On one hand, the citizenry literally “sustains” this high level of spending with more than 90% of school budgets, on average, being approved on the first vote. Nevertheless, there are many calls on the public purse and it is incumbent on all levels of government to continuously strive for the wisest and most prudent use of available resources.

This requires examination and work in a number of areas:

- Rules - Review of the State Board of Education Manual of Rules and Practices and the Rulemaking process to assure responsiveness to contemporary needs.
- Finance - In an area that is subject to various competing claims, we must first define the problems with greater precision and focus. We lack a full and comprehensive understanding of the reasons for the cost increases and the reasons for disparities in costs across the state. The state needs a “Report Card on School Finance” (similar to that produced in the 1990s), that identifies and analyzes school finance, over time, using the common set of national benchmarks. (Some of this is in the Picus report). Cost-shifts, new federal and state mandates, and progressivity/regressivity of possible finance changes require exploration.
- Staffing - Vermont arguably has the most generous complement of teachers and staff in the nation. In seeking to understand the exact nature of this staffing pattern, available data are scattered and not comprehensive. It is well-established that favorable ratios are a key to high achievement on academic and social outcomes. Yet, practicality and efficiency issues are compelling. While some Agency studies are underway, we do not have a clear picture of how and why our staffing ratios are as high as they are. Part may be in special education needs, some may be in lags from declining enrollments, and part may be in new mandates from state and federal governments.

For “high-staffing” and “low staffing” schools, the causes, locations (geographic, type, subject area, level, etc.) are not well established. Once the nature and causes of the staffing patterns are determined, policy recommendations are expected to emerge.

- Education Leaders - Anecdotally, we understand there is a shortage of educational leaders. As with other topics, we first need to understand whether the situation is better or worse than our own history indicates and how our turn-over compares to the nation. Implications for recruiting, training, job descriptions/ expectations, and conditions of practice are likely indicated.

Implementation Plan

State law (16 V.S.A. §180) requires the State Board of Education (SBE) to develop and adopt a statewide strategic education plan, employing a public input process. The plan's purposes are to strengthen coherence and consistency across the state, establish standards for student performance and assessment, and provide support for professional and curriculum development. Along with other items, the plan must include information on economic costs and educational benefits to be derived from the planned activities.

In this statutorily required five year update, the SBE focuses on two paramount concerns: Equity of Opportunity, and the Efficiency and Stability of the state's educational system. The recent adoption of the new Education Quality Standards addresses the comprehensive goals for education, and the required characteristics of the assessment and accountability system were defined by the SBE in August 2014. These elements are considered as integral parts of this plan.

This strategic plan is considered to be a working document which will be revisited regularly, in whole or in part, in order to incorporate new information, reexamine priorities, and develop synergy between the SBE and all stakeholders.

After providing an opportunity for public input and further refining, the SBE will continue to take action on the strategic plan at its November 2014 meeting as well as at its December 2014 meeting, if necessary. It is anticipated that for each of these two goals, the SBE will:

1. Empirically define and identify the problems the state faces (year 1).
2. Explore potential solutions and create a series of white papers to share with stakeholders and collaborators (year 2).
3. Create and employ strategies to address the barriers. This will require working with the Agency, the legislature and other stakeholders (years 3-5).